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FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION  
OFFICE OF SECRETARY

February 27, 1996

Acting Secretary William F. Caton  
Federal Communications Commission  
1919 M Street N.W., Room 234  
Washington, D.C. 20554

DOCKET FILE COPY ORIGINAL

Dear Secretary Caton:

Enclosed are the original and nine copies of the comments of Self Help for Hard of Hearing People, Inc. (SHHH) on the FCC Notice of Inquiry concerning closed captioning of video programming.

The issue of closed captioning of video programming is of vital concern to our constituency, the 26 million people who are hard of hearing in this country, and we appreciate the opportunity to be able to submit comments.

Sincerely,

Donna Sorkin  
Executive Director

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Before the  
FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION  
Washington, D.C.

FEB 27 1996

FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION  
OFFICE OF SECRETARY

In the Matter of

Closed Captioning and Video  
Description of Video Programming

MM Docket No. 95-176

DOCKET FILE COPY ORIGINAL

COMMENTS OF

SELF HELP FOR HARD OF HEARING PEOPLE, INC. (SHHH)

I. Introduction

Self Help for Hard of Hearing People, Inc. (SHHH) hereby submits comments in response to the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) Notice of Inquiry (NOI), dated December 4, 1995, concerning closed captioning and video description of video programming.

SHHH is a national educational organization representing people who are hard of hearing of all ages and degrees of hearing loss. Through a National office, three state associations and a network of 270 chapters and groups across the country, SHHH members work towards increasing communication access to enable people who are hard of hearing to continue to function in mainstream society. We recognize the FCC's long standing commitment to telecommunications for all Americans and appreciate the opportunity to submit these comments.

## II. Benefits of Closed Captioning

Accessing telecommunications is vital in today's world and captioning is the key to ensuring that people who are hard of hearing can get their news, information, education, and entertainment from TV just like everyone else. Equally important, in today's reliance on the media during political campaigns, is the need for captioning to allow people with hearing loss to participate fully as citizens.

It is estimated that one in nine of the population has hearing loss and this rises to one in three over the age of 65. As people are living longer it is predicted that by the year 2000 40 million people in the U.S. over the age of 65 will have some degree of hearing loss. Many millions of them can benefit from captioning. Such a large group of the population cannot be ignored or left out of the advantages that TV provides. Indeed, some SHHH members have expressed that anything less than 100% captioned TV is a form of censorship. They cannot choose the programs they watch, rather the programs are chosen for them depending on whether they are captioned or not. SHHH realizes that 100% captioned TV cannot come overnight but we are committed to that goal and look forward to working with the FCC to reach it.

Captioning allows for families to view programs together when one member has hearing loss. It eliminates the need to have the TV volume turned up to maximum and the stress that it creates in a

household. Parents who are hard of hearing want to be actively involved in their children's TV watching and are not able to do this without captions. During snow emergencies captioning, either open or closed, allows parents and employees to monitor which school districts and places of employment are closed and make plans accordingly.

The impact of acquired hearing loss on an individual's social, emotional, vocational, and educational status tends to be underestimated. There is plenty of anecdotal evidence to show that captioning enhances the quality of life of people who are hard of hearing. Apart from the obvious benefits of access to information, we should not downplay the benefits of captioned TV as a stress reliever when it allows a person, who would otherwise not be able to watch TV, to enjoy a program and laugh or cry or experience other emotions through the powerful media of TV.

Other audiences can benefit from captioning as well. Research and anecdotal evidence shows that captioning has improved reading and English skills for children, adults learning to read, persons learning English as a second language, and remedial readers. In addition, captioning helps all viewers in noisy locations such as transportation terminals, hotel lobbies, fitness centers, and restaurants, or in quiet ones such as hospitals, libraries, and government and private offices.

### III. Availability of Closed Captioning

Although 100% of prime time and children's programming on network broadcasts are captioned, most of the top 25 basic cable stations caption little or none of their programs. With the exception of CNN and USA, on average, fewer than 8% of basic cable programs are captioned. Similarly, few commercial advertisements are captioned, and hardly any coming attractions, program recaps, program reviews, or station breaks are captioned, on either broadcast networks or cable stations.

Local newscasts lag way behind in the number which are captioned and this is distressing to people in those communities who want to watch their local news programs. Those local newscasts which are captioned are the result of intense advocacy efforts on the part of concerned groups and individuals. Even in communities where the local news is captioned it does not always provide complete access. For instance, in some places only the news read from a prompting board is captioned leaving uncaptioned all weather reports, all on site reporting, and impromptu talk among newscasters. SHHH members living in areas at risk for natural disasters, such as Florida, have told us of their concern at not having storm alerts and instructions from emergency management personnel captioned. They need the same periodic updates and instructions that other viewers get, but captioned, so they can protect themselves, their family, and their property.

More and more universities are offering long distance learning via TV. Unless these courses are captioned individuals with

hearing loss will not be able to take advantage of classes offered in their home.

#### IV. Funding of Closed Captioning

There is no doubt that the amount of captioning would not be where it is today without the funding provided by the federal government. The Department of Education has contributed in the past and still contributes today significant funds directly to network broadcasters for the captioning of syndicated programming. Because the Telecommunications Act of 1996 now mandates captioning, video providers and owners will be soon responsible for funding their own captioning. SHHH supports redirecting federal funds that are still available to funding research for improved captioning technology, providing subsidies for programmers that can show undue burden, and providing seed money for the captioning of programs by low-budget programmers and video program owners.

#### V. Quality

The quality of closed captions varies considerably, and affects the usefulness of the captions. Even though the technology to allow options in placement of captions exists, captions are still placed at the bottom of the screen covering up identification information. Particularly difficult to understand is real-time captioning which scrolls fast and can be affected by captioning skill through mistroking, omitting a word, or failing to preprogram

a word into their dictionary. Real-time accuracy for live television should be 98% or better. Looking to the future we urge the FCC to promote research into voice recognition which has come a long way in the last five years and could hold great promise for captioning.

The FCC should establish minimum standards to ensure the high quality of captioning services. Following are guidelines to assist in the development of such standards:

1. SHHH supports verbatim captioning. We do not believe it is within the captioning company's role to edit material, or decide how fast or slow the viewer is capable of reading. Rather they are there to provide access, through captions, to what the individual would be hearing if able to do so. There have been suggestions to provide slower speed captions, if necessary, on the CC2 channel.

2. Requirements for proper spelling, grammar, timing, accuracy and placement of captions should be designed to achieve full access to video programming.

3. Captions should include not only verbal information but other elements of the soundtrack necessary for functionally equivalent access. Examples of things to include would be identification of the individual who is speaking, sound effects, audience reaction and name of song/music being played.

4. Captions should be provided with the style and standards which are appropriate for the particular type of programming that is being captioned. For example often local newscasts are captioned with computer-generated captioning - also know as electronic newsroom captioning. This method simply does not provide functionally equivalent video service because it misses the captioning of live interviews, sports and weather updates, school closings, and other late breaking stories which are not pre-scripted. Additionally, this method produces captions which are typically out of sync with what is being reported, lagging far behind or jumping way ahead of the anchor person's statements. For all of these reasons, the Commission should require real-time captioning for local news broadcasts and all other live programming. Real-time captioning uses a caption stenographer to simultaneously caption live audio programming ensuring that viewers receive complete and up-to-the-minute captions of all that is on the soundtrack.

5. Captions must be reformatted as necessary if the programs on which they have been included have been compressed or otherwise edited. Videos are frequently edited as they move from movie theaters to premium cable stations to basic cable stations to syndication. This editing process typically entails removing frames of the video to compress it into a smaller time period. Video providers must be required to reformat captions on programs that have been edited to ensure that such captions are presented intact and in place.



6. Care must be taken to ensure that captioning remains intact as it moves through the distribution chain from its point of origination to the local video provider. Often captions on programs that are initially intact either arrive scrambled or are even stripped by the time such programs reach their final cable or local network destinations. This problem can easily be remedied by requiring individuals positioned at signal monitoring stations to monitor captions as they pass from a program's site of origination to local affiliates, cable providers, or other final destinations.

7. Open character generated announcements, such as emergency warnings, weather advisories, elections results, and school closings should not obstruct or be obstructed by closed captions. Standards need to be developed to ensure the proper placement of these open scrawls.

SHHH would be very pleased to work with other groups representing deaf and hard of hearing individuals and captioning services to provide the FCC with input towards developing these minimum standards.

## VI. Transition

SHHH shares the National Association of the Deaf's (NAD) target of 100 percent captioning of all television programs. We also recognize that a reasonable timetable to reach that goal has to be set in place.

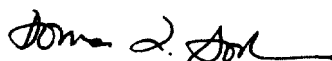
Accordingly we propose requiring premium cable stations to caption 100 percent of their programs within 90 days of the effective date of the FCC's rules.

New programs ( i.e. programs that are first published or exhibited after the effective date of the FCC's captioning regulations) should be required to caption within six months after the effective date of the FCC's rules. SHHH supports the NAD's criteria for developing a timetable for captioning thereafter taking into account the size of the video programmer/owner, the type of program, and the airing time for the program. If the FCC adopts a timetable for captioning we urge requiring all new video programming by an outside limit of 2 - 3 years.

#### VII. Conclusion

We thank the FCC for initiating this NOI to gather the information needed to develop regulations on closed captioning as mandated by the Telecommunications Act of 1996. We look forward to the FCC issuing captioning rules which will bring us closer to the ultimate goal of all Americans having access to video services and programs.

Respectfully submitted,



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February 27, 1996